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FEMINISM AND SEX ETHICS.

ELSIE CLEWS PARSONS.

THE lapse of the proprietary theory about woman was the great contribution of the nineteenth century to sex ethics. But the full consequence of that lapse was by no means realized even by the end of the century nor was a related issue of feminism, the inclusion of woman, an issue quite as significant as her emancipation. To these contributions to the ethics of sex the twentieth century is adding another, its own distinctive contribution. I refer to the theory that for women as for men mating and parenthood are separable facts.

Of this theory feminism is a logical as well as an historical antecedent, a relationship that feminists, particularly the early feminists, have denied because they so greatly disliked the terms of opprobrium in which it was pointed out to them. The charge of "free love" made them, so to speak, see red. They took it as the insult it was intended. Castigation for an hypothetical wantonness obscured for them the issue—a little anti-feminist strategy far from novel. And so the bugaboo of an imputed promiscuity scared the fugitives back into one corner of the proprietary fold.

And there they have stayed accumulating, let me say incidentally, a good deal of sex resistance and sex bitterness. Because one of their natural outlets was closed to them, and this the outlet of all others that would have led them into a community of interests with the other sex, their energy and vehemence in other directions were intensified. Feminism narrowed in became subject to sex antagonism. Instead of broadening out to take in the sex relationship it merely stared at the closed door and denounced men.

But the door is now opening, thanks less to feminism, it must be admitted, than to other factors, thanks shall we

say to progress in the practice of medicine and thanks to economic pressure, economic pressure upon men as well as upon women. "The spacing of babies," late marriage, childless marriage, persistent celibacy, are the facts that, left detached, are troublesome enough to call for an interpretation, to make people, as we say, sit up and think. The conclusion they are reaching is the theory the feminists ran away from years ago, the theory that the sex relationship should be distinguished from the parental relationship, distinguished I mean, of course, in theory, not necessarily in concrete life.

The consequences of this theory to sex ethics are vital and fundamental. To begin with it facilitates clearing away the dead wood of the proprietary theory of the family. Archaisms like parental consent to marriage, suits for seduction, for breach of promise, for the restitution of conjugal rights, such vestiges of parental or marital proprietorship are more easily displaced. And then in many ways appeal for the rights of the unborn ceases to confuse the appeal for the rights of the mating woman or man. Mating may at last set up its own standards.

Paramount among them is the standard of reciprocity. Desire for responsiveness replaces the desire for proprietorship. Love-making becomes mutual, a matter of mutual satisfaction, of mutual devotion.

Important to responsiveness is candor. Seduction in love-making is to be redefined. A man may be seduced, it is now realized, as well as a woman. Any deception in courtship as to what either man or woman asks or offers is seduction. Desires for offspring, for social position, for property or support, for the momentary satisfaction of passion, all these desires if detached and therefore significant of a partial, one-sided relationship, should at least be overt, acknowledged. The relationship as far as it goes should be frank, as frank in marriage, shall we say, as it is now in prostitution.

And it should be sincere, unsentimental. When change comes it should be met, not lied about or shirked. Life

is change and any live personal relation is a changing relation. In so far as marriage to-day hypothecates an unchanging relationship it is an impersonal relationship, a relationship of status, not a relationship between personalities.

And so permanence will cease to be the final criterion of virtue in mating. It is of course the criterion society is fondest of because of the guaranty it affords every one against readjustment. Society does not like to have the associations it makes disturbed. For its own peace of mind it would have people stay where it puts them. Impermanence in mating is too upsetting to society to be accounted anything but unworthy, base, to be precluded at any price, even at the price of sincerity, even at the price sometimes of all that makes the relationship worthy.

As one looks ahead permanence in mating is seen to lose its very egregious place. Lasting love will be accounted a good, like lasting health or energy or happiness. But, as in health or happiness, the enduring character of it will not be considered of itself, will not be its justification, as it were, for existing. Its loss will be considered a disaster, a tragedy, not an offense; a misfortune society would regret or pity, not condemn or revile.

In place of permanence we shall have then as the criterion of passionate love, reciprocity, frankness, and sincerity, and we shall have integrity, whole-heartedness. Integrity, a full and rich relationship, will be far more than at present the criterion of mating. We subscribe now to that standard, but in words merely. For we suffer the existence of almost insuperable obstacles to integrity, we welcome conditions which make for a meagre, partial, and impoverished relationship. The daily familiarity we so insist upon in marriage would of itself take the edge off any spiritual intimacy, dulling responsiveness. A degree of loneliness is essential to fervor. And, for many of us, other personal relationships. It is only when monogamy is an observance, not a spiritual relationship, that it is dependent upon a continuous and exclusive intercourse.

In conclusion let me say that one would not be didactic or oracular about the nature of the mating that is to set up its own standards. Its spiritual character is not easy to foresee; there is so little in the past to suggest it. Rarely has mating been theorized about for itself, rarely even by those masked figures of incipient moralities, the novelists. For the most part it has been considered for "the good of society," *i.e.*, the good of the Elders or in latter days for the good of the unborn. That it is not a separable good is even now the stand of the Elders, their last stand in self-defense.

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